

# Horrrifying fire at California lithium battery plant sparks calls for new clean energy rules

When a massive fire erupted at one of the world's largest lithium-ion battery storage facilities in Monterey County, it didn't just send plumes of smoke over nearby communities — it cast a pall over the future of California's clean energy industry.

The fire at the Moss Landing Power Plant, which ignited on Jan. 16, burned for five days and ultimately destroyed around 80% of the batteries inside the building. Now, as the smoke clears, Monterey-area officials warn that the blaze may be a harbinger as the state increases its reliance on renewable energy, electric vehicles and other battery-powered devices.

“I know green is good, but we've got to move slowly,” Monterey County Supervisor Glenn Church told The Times. “What we're doing with this technology is way ahead of government regulations and ahead of the industry's ability to control it.”

The fire earlier this month was the fourth at Moss Landing since 2019, and the third at buildings owned by Texas-based Vistra Energy. The plant is off Highway 1, about 18 miles northeast of the city of Monterey.

## **CALIFORNIA**

### **Monterey County officials call Moss Landing lithium battery storage fire a 'wake-up call'**

Already, the fire has prompted calls for additional safety regulations around battery storage, and more local control over where storage sites are located. Officials are also demanding that Moss Landing remain offline until an investigation can be completed and major safety improvements implemented.

Assemblymember Dawn Addis (D-Morro Bay) has introduced Assembly Bill 303 — the Battery Energy Safety & Accountability Act — which would require local engagement in the permitting process for battery or energy storage facilities, and establish a buffer to keep such sites a set distance away from sensitive areas like schools, hospitals and natural habitats.

“I believe that we are living in a climate crisis and that we need to have solutions,” Addis said at a news conference Thursday. “But along with those solutions, we have to be able to have safety.”

Gov. Gavin Newsom, a fierce advocate of clean energy, agrees an investigation is needed to determine the fire’s cause and supports taking steps to make Moss Landing and similar facilities safer, his spokesperson Daniel Villaseñor said in a statement.

## **BUSINESS**

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Oct. 12, 2023

Addis and two other state legislators sent a letter to the California Public Utilities Commission Thursday requesting an investigation.

“The Moss Landing facility has represented a pivotal piece of our state’s energy future, however this disastrous fire has undermined the public’s trust in utility scale lithium-ion battery energy storage systems,” states the letter. “If we are to ensure California moves its climate and energy goals forward, we must demonstrate a steadfast commitment to safety.”

Vistra has promised an internal investigation into the incident, and to conduct soil testing and fully cooperate with any state or local investigations.

During an emergency briefing after the fire broke out, officials said a plume released from the plant contained hydrogen fluoride, a toxic compound, according to county spokesperson Nick Pasculli.

However, initial testing from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ruled that the levels of toxic gases released by the batteries, including hydrogen fluoride, did not pose a threat to public health during the fire.

## **CALIFORNIA**

### **Lithium-ion batteries causing fires, dangers on California freeways, sparking calls for safety improvements**

Still, many residents remain on edge about potential long-term impacts on the nearby communities of Watsonville, Castroville, Salinas and the ecologically sensitive Elkhorn Slough estuary.

“Having to experience and witness that kind of assault, not just on the people, but on the trees and the environment in general was horrifying,” local resident Silvia Morales told The Times. “The aftereffects might be long term, and I’m seriously concerned about the fact that the plant is adjacent to organic farms that are producing food.”

Several factors contributed to the rapid spread of the fire and complicated firefighters' response, according to North County Fire District Chief Joel Mendoza.

A fire suppression system that is part of every battery rack at the plant failed and led to a chain reaction of batteries catching on fire, he said at a news conference last week. Then, a broken camera system in the plant and superheated gases made it challenging for firefighters to intervene.

Once the fire began spreading, firefighters were not able to use water, because doing so can trigger a violent chemical reaction in lithium-ion batteries, potentially causing more to ignite or explode.

## **CALIFORNIA**

### **Big rig with lithium ion batteries flips in San Pedro, sparking hazardous fire, closing freeway**

Sept. 26, 2024

The scale of the fire startled local residents and officials, who have already experienced several smaller fires at the plant and are worried about what could happen if major changes aren't made.

Exacerbating those concerns is a new battery storage site proposed in an unincorporated part of Santa Cruz County near Watsonville. An [online petition](#) to halt the establishment of any more battery storage facilities in Monterey or Santa Cruz counties has collected more than 2,900 signatures.

The Monterey County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to declare a local state of emergency and to send a letter to Vistra and Pacific Gas and Electric Co., which also stores batteries at the plant, to request that their operations remain offline until an investigation is complete.

Local resident Ed Mitchell, who was speaking on behalf of a newly formed community group called the Moss Landing Fire Community Recovery Group, told supervisors that the potential of electric batteries is exciting.

But, he added, it's a "technology that when it goes wrong, it's not thrilling, it's terrifying."

*Times staff writer Nathan Solis contributed to this report.*